Tony Robinson Visits Fishbourne

FRIENDS OF
Fishbourne
ROMAN PALACE

Issue 5: May 2007

On a sunny day in early March we were proud to be able to welcome to Fishbourne none other than Tony Robinson. Although the CDC has been open for very nearly a year now, we thought it would be appropriate to invite some of the individuals who had been instrumental in the completion of the project to see the fruits of their efforts. Over 100 invited guests were able to attend, making it abundantly clear to everybody concerned what an extensive project it has been.

Tony unveils the plaque marking his visit

While the event was officially a formal affair, the atmosphere was informal and genial. Guests were given guided tours of the main Palace and the new store and, following an excellent lunch, we assembled outside for the speeches. During his speech, Tony amazed everyone present with the fact that his connection with Fishbourne is longer than we could have imagined. He first visited the site in the 1970s whilst working at Chichester Festival Theatre. It was at this time that his interest in archaeology was awakened. This interest motivated him to sign up to go on an excavation which happened to be directed by Mick Ashton. Tony and Mick became great friends and it was this relationship that ended up in the creation of Time Team - the series for which they are perhaps best known.

It is a nice thought that Fishbourne played a small part in the conception of this famous television series which has inspired a generation of budding archaeologists.

Although the recent project has, to all intents and purposes, been completed for almost a year, this unveiling was an important milestone for us. It firmly places the disruption of the redevelopment in the past. It is now time for us to look to the future. Fishbourne is open for business and is back to doing what it does best!

Tony is shown around the North Wing by the Director

Fishbourne Roman Palace opening times

Now until 31st July: open every day, 10am -5pm
1st Aug until 31st Aug: open every day, 10am -6pm
1st Sept until 31st Oct: open every day, 10am-5pm
1st Nov until 15th Dec: open every day, 10am-4pm

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Forthcoming Event:

"Britain BC"

In collaboration with
Chichester District Museum

The building of the CDC in partnership with our colleagues from Chichester District Museum has generated opportunities to extend the range of activities we hold at Fishbourne. The first joint event to be held between the District Museum and Fishbourne Roman Palace will be "Britain BC", a day of activities for the whole family which will be based on the lives of our prehistoric ancestors, including Celtic shield and jewellery making, flint knapping, weaving and spinning. These activities will be free and we hope to see you there. The event will be on Saturday the 26th May in the Collections Discovery Centre from 11am-1pm and 2pm-4pm.

In the evening we are very proud to be able to welcome Nicholas Ashton, who will be presenting a lecture entitled "500,000 years of humans in Britain". Nick is the senior curator of prehistory at the British Museum, and works very much at the cutting edge of research into prehistoric Britain. For anybody interested in the most recent advances in this field, this lecture is a must see event.

There will be no charge to come to this lecture and there are a few tickets left. If you would like to join us, please email "adminfish@sussexpast.co.uk" or telephone (01243) 785859 to reserve you place. The lecture will take place on the 26th May in the Rudkin Room at the Collections Discovery Centre, Fishbourne Roman Palace, from 7pm.

Situations Vacant

Some of you may recall that when the "Friends of Fishbourne" was first set up back in the Autumn of 2004, it was our hope that it would eventually be run by you, the Friends themselves. We are now in the happy position to be able to ask if any of our existing members would like to get together and take the Friends of Fishbourne to a new level.

If you feel you have something to offer in this respect, be it new ideas, computer skills, previous experience or simply enthusiasm, then please get in touch with us. We will certainly make sure that every possible support is provided so that the transition can be as smooth as possible.

Looking after our Friends has been a hugely rewarding experience for me and I look forward to passing on the baton and watching the Friends of Fishbourne go from strength to strength.

A Mystery at the Palace

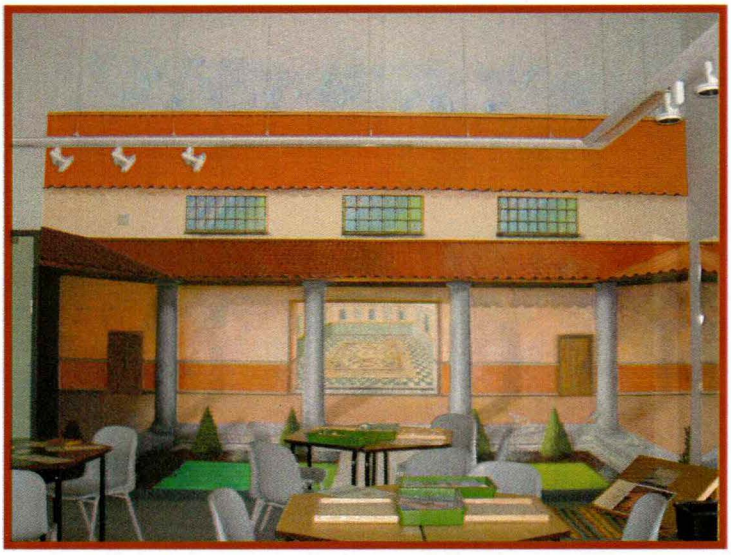
Over the last couple of weeks, some very strange discoveries have been made at the Roman Palace. Colin, our assistant gardener has found a number of animal bones on the central lawn of the palace garden. Fortunately, we have our very own expert on animal bone here these days who was only too happy to offer his opinion.

It turns out that Colin has found the partial remains of a butchered pig, a sheep and, remarkably, a fallow deer. The only likely culprit is a fox, which are known to move bones from place to place. The bones do show signs of having been gnawed by a carnivore, but a mystery remains: we cannot explain why a fox would have concentrated all of these bones in a single area of the site and how would it have gained access to a fallow deer carcass in the locality?

Not only is this a curiosity, but it has sparked our interest because working out the ways in which different objects come to end up in the same place is one of the key tasks of the archaeologist.

Artists in residence

In the last newsletter we introduced you to Joan Smith, an artist who was working on a mural in the Rudkin Room - the new education room in the Collections Discovery Centre. Well, Joan has now finished her project and the new mural, a half scale image of room N7 (containing the famous dolphin mosaic) as viewed from its courtyard, has universally met with great acclaim from staff and visitors alike.



Joan's finished mural: an impressive addition to the new education space

The mural is perhaps even more impressive than the detailed sketch on which it was based. Despite being about 6 metres wide and 4 metres high, the level of detail depicted is quite remarkable. Joan has even managed to represent individual tesserae within the mosaic.

With the completion of the mural, the Rudkin Room is now a fully functional addition to Fishbourne's education resources. It has already hosted a number of meetings, artefact analysis workshops and of course several school groups. Appropriately enough, it was recently the venue for a party for Joan and her many friends who helped her in her project.

One of Helen's artworks: an embossed etching inspired by Roman samian stamps

Joan is not the only artist who we have been lucky enough to be able to host here at Fishbourne. We have recently installed an exhibition of work by Helen Higgins, of University College Chichester. Helen has been working on the Fishbourne and Chichester District Museum reserve collections, taking inspiration from intentional and incidental impressions on artefacts she has found in the store.

Helen's work is based on embossed etchings, which mirror the potters' marks, fingerprints, and combed impressions on the pottery and tile which inspired her. The work is displayed in the viewing window into the sensitive store in the Collections Discovery Centre and imitates a museum display. The embossed images and the copper plates from which they were made taking the place of the artefacts themselves.

The display is running in parallel with a similar exhibition at Chichester District Museum. We would encourage you to find a few minutes to explore Helen's work. If you like it us much as I do, some of the items are even available for sale.

Helen's installation in the window to the sensitive store in the CDC. Helen hopes to return to Fishbourne to undertake further projects based on our collections, so watch this space for more of her work!

Celts Invade the Roman Palace!

Here at Fishbourne we are quite used to playing host to the Romans during special events, such as Roman Army Week, Gladiators or the Ermine Street Guard. However, it was recently the turn of the Celts to put in an appearance. On the 4th and 5th of April we opened the doors on the first (but certainly not the last) "Celtic Spring Festival" event. We mustn't forget that Celts would have lived alongside Romans at Fishbourne and this special event, aimed at families with children, celebrated the Celtic history of the site.

Pottery making, story telling, woad face painting and roundhouse building were among the activities on offer. Celtic cooking (and tasting!) was particularly popular and there were even some goats, poultry and a horse in attendance, courtesy of Fox Hollow animal sanctuary.

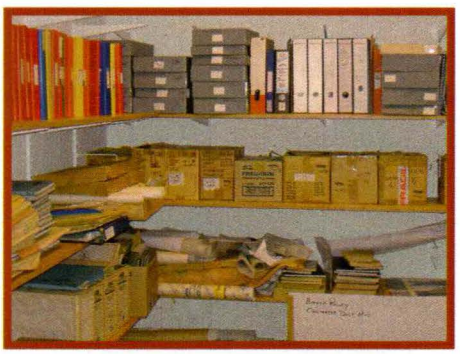
Two of our volunteers preparing traditional Celtic dishes over the open fire for our visitors to try.

The day seemed very popular with our visitors, almost certainly helped by the unseasonably fine weather, and the staff certainly enjoyed the chance to try their hands at some new activities. It was unanimously agreed that this should be an event to be repeated.

Time to Tackle the Archive

It will come as no surprise that, since the discovery of Fishbourne Roman Palace in 1960, a vast number of artefacts have been recovered (about 200,000 at the last estimate!), all of which need to be stored and preserved for future generations. What may not be quite so obvious is the fact that the excavations which have enabled the recovery of this material (about 50 separate digs!) have also generated an enormous quantity of paperwork that must also be stored so that it can be referred to by researchers. Photographs, drawings of trenches and individual objects, as well as page after page of descriptions of archaeological features and sediments make up the paper archive which is arguably the most important part of our collections.

For quite a while, it has been apparent that much of this paper archive is in considerable need of attention. Tatty box files and notebooks with loose pages are certainly not the ideal way to preserve an archaeological archive. More important than improving the physical storage conditions of this paperwork is cataloguing it, so that we know what is included in the archive and where to find it when it is needed.



Part of the archive as it can be seen today. This material relates to sites other than the Roman Palace,

With this in mind, we have recently started the Fishbourne Archive Project. This one year project, funded by a Museum Development Fund grant from the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council, will tackle the paperwork in the archive (photographs and drawings will require separate treatment). One of our volunteers will sort and list each section of the archive, packing them in new acid-free files to modern conservation standards, and creating a database that can be used to locate any single document. We will also be able to host a professional archivist who will provide training in the storage and cataloguing of these documents.

The importance of this part of our collections cannot be overstated. The vast majority of archaeological research requires an understanding of the actual and relative find spots of different artefacts and it is the paper archive that provides this information. The Fishbourne Archive Project will preserve our records and make them accessible to the public - enormously increasing the research potential of our collections as a whole.